To fight or to vote: Sovereignty referendums as strategies in conflicts over self-determination

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Abstract

TO FIGHT OR TO VOTE: Sovereignty Referendums as Strategies in Conflicts over Self-Determination

by Friederike Luise Kelle and Mitja Sienknecht*

Subnational groups employ a variety of strategies to contest governments. While democratic states offer a broader array of accessible options, autocratic regimes are more difficult to contest via conventional means. Why do subnational groups stage sovereignty referendums across regime types? Our argument is that public votes over greater autonomy or independence signal adherence to international democratic norms and the legitimacy of the demand towards three audiences: the state, the domestic population, and the international community. Self-determination groups seek to gain support from their domestic constituency as well as the international community in order to pressure the state government into granting concessions. We introduce a new dataset of referendums and international diplomacy by subnational self-determination groups on a global scale between 1990 and 2015. We supplement the descriptive evidence and assess the plausibility of the proposed mechanism with an out-of-sample case of an in-sample observation, the 2017 independence referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan. We show that referendums are indeed associated with international diplomacy and domestic state building by self-determination groups, suggesting that both tools are critical for the choice of conventional strategies across regime types.

Keywords: self-determination, conflict, referendum, rebel diplomacy, domestic institution building

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Zusammenfassung

Kämpfen oder Abstimmen? Souveränitätsreferenden als Strategien in Konflikten über Selbstbestimmung

von Friederike Luise Kelle und Mitja Sienknecht*

Subnationale Gruppen verwenden eine Vielzahl von Strategien bei der Verfolgung ihrer Forderungen gegenüber der Regierung. Während demokratische Staaten zahlreiche Handlungsoptionen für Gruppen bereithalten, ist es in autokratischen Regimen schwieriger, die Politik auf konventionellem Wege anzufechten. Warum führen subnationale Gruppen Referenden in unterschiedlichen Regimetypen durch? Unser Argument ist, dass Referenden (über größere Autonomie oder Unabhängigkeit) die Einhaltung internationaler demokratischer Normen und die Legitimität der Forderungen gegenüber drei Zielgruppen – dem Staat, der Gruppenpopulation und der internationalen Gemeinschaft – signalisiert. Selbstbestimmungsgruppen versuchen, die Unterstützung von Gruppenangehörigen und der internationalen Gemeinschaft zu sichern um die Regierung zu Zugeständnissen zu bewegen. Wir stellen einen neuen Datensatz vor, der Referenden und internationale Diplomatie von subnationalen Selbstbestimmungsgruppen auf globaler Ebene zwischen 1990 und 2015 erhebt. Wir ergänzen die deskriptive Datenanalyse und testen die Plausibilität des vorgeschlagenen Mechanismus mithilfe des kurdischen Unabhängigkeitsreferendums im Nordirak in 2017, einer Beobachtung eines Falles aus dem Datensatz, aber außerhalb des Analysezeitraums. Wir zeigen, dass Referenden in der Tat mit internationaler Diplomatie und der Einrichtung substaatlicher Institutionen verbunden sind, was darauf hinweist, dass beide Strategien wesentlich sind für die Wahl konventioneller Strategien über Regimetypen hinweg.

Stichworte: Selbstbestimmung, Konflikt, Referendum, Rebellendiplomatie, Aufbau substaatlicher Institutionen

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1. Introduction

Throughout the history of the relationship between the Kurds and the Iraqi authorities, the Kurds have resorted to both violence and conventional politics to achieve their goal of independence from the Iraqi state.[1] Since the end of World War II the Kurds had been embroiled in an armed struggle with the Iraqi government, marked with alternating periods of cooperation. The first Kurdish autonomy arrangement was established in 1970, but lasted only until 1974 when the Iraqi government reneged on the agreement, leading to a renewed war between the Kurds and the Iraqi government. In the 1990s, the Kurds developed strong ties to international allies, such as the U.S, that enabled the unilateral foundation of a de-facto Kurdish state in the North of Iraq. In the aftermath of the international invasion of Iraq by the U.S.-led coalition and the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, this autonomy was institutionalized and inscribed in the Constitution of Iraq. In 2017, when the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) was almost beaten by the combined mission of Kurdish Peshmerga and an International Alliance, the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) conducted a unilateral independence referendum that uncovered a high level of support for an independent Kurdish state (Kaplan, 2019). Kurdish officials expected the support of the international community, but this episode resulted once again in a violent conflict with the Iraqi government and the non-recognition of the referendum – both on the national and international level (O'Driscoll & Baser, 2019, p. 2).

Similar to the Iraqi Kurds, many subnational groups conduct sovereignty referendums on their political status in order to achieve greater autonomy or even independence from the central state. While separatist conflicts are among the most protracted and deadly (Gurr, 2000, p. 276), not all subnational groups choose to conduct political polls about their future. Why do subnational groups stage sovereignty referendums across regime types?

[1] The Kurdish population lives divided in four states: Iraq, Iran, Turkey, and Syria. It is the fourth-largest ethnic group in the Middle East with around 40 million people. The Kurds faced and mostly still face in all four countries a policy of subjugation and repression out of fear of Kurdish uprisings and separationist movements (Jongerden 2019). In Turkey, Kurdish groups entered the Turkish political party system and work from within the system to gain more rights. In Iran, the political organization of Kurdish groups is mainly oppressed by the Iranian regime. In light of the war in Syria, Kurdish groups were able to build-up an autonomous administration of North and East Syria, also known as Rojava. In the turmoil of the war, they established a form of self-governance without asking the Syrian government for permission. Kurdish groups used different strategies in the four states. This study will focus on the Iraqi Kurds.

We argue that subnational groups that seek autonomy or independence from the central state through a referendum exert pressure on the national government by securing support from both domestic and international audiences. The national level is the primary audience groups aim to signal with a referendum, given the fact that greater autonomy or independence can only be granted by the national government.[2] Referendums show that the impetus for independence is not exclusively expressing the will of the elite, but representative of broad common consensus seeking greater self-rule. At the same time, they demonstrate resolve in the fight for greater subnational sovereignty or independence, garnering the support by a broad constituent base. Where domestic and international audiences embrace the bid for self-determination, we argue, referendums are more likely to be an attractive strategy for self-determination groups. Therefore, we expect that groups seek to strengthen the local and international structures in order to create pressure – from above and below – on the national government.

How do subnational groups garner leverage in their bid for sovereignty, thereby making the call for a referendum more likely? We argue that the combination of domestic governance structures and international diplomacy serve to maximize the signaling value of referendums towards the government. On the one hand, groups build up local governance structures, including social services like health care, education, and taxes. These structures increase the perceived legitimacy of the group towards the regional constituency while demonstrating the capacity and ability "to get things done". On the other hand, we claim that being in good standing with decisive actors in the international arena helps to overcome the asymmetric relationship between the group and the national government. International diplomacy signals towards the international community that, in line with existing members of the state system, groups have internalized prevalent (democratic) norms and values and incorporated decision-making tools involving public opinion. As the international community plays a decisive role in supporting claims for autonomy and independence, subnational groups go to great lengths in order to develop diplomacy structures with international actors. In this paper, we focus on the establishment of diplomatic structures of subnational groups.

[2] Exceptions include Kosovo, where the Serbian government did not accept the separation of Kosovo from the core state, while some members of the international community recognized it as an independent state.

This is the first study to link the employment of sovereignty referendums to the strategic calculations of subnational self-determination groups regarding their political status in the national and international realm in a large scale, comparative setting. This allows us to make sense of the interactions between the subnational, national, and international levels in accounting for sovereignty referendums on a global scale. Furthermore, we are able to identify which functions referendums fulfill for groups in their pursuit of autonomy or independence. Our argument speaks to the literature on the success of self-determination demands, referendum use, and diplomacy by non-state actors. First, we relate to debates in the literature on state birth and subnational demands for self-determination. While the role of diplomacy by subnational groups for recognition and involvement by external actors has received attention (Fazal & Griffiths, 2014; Petrova, 2019), we know little about the importance of referendums in this process. Second, existing research on referendums over sovereignty focuses mostly on the domestic determinants of referendums (Butler & Ranney, 1994; Qvortrup, 2014c). However, referendums might be used strategically to signal eligibility for membership in the international community, despite groups being fully aware that the often unilateral referendum will not lead automatically to full independence (O'Discroll 2019, p. 6). Third, our research relates to the rebel governance literature, which deals with the fact that rebel groups build up state-like governance structures (Arjona et al. 2015) and develop diplomacy structures linking them to actors of the world political system (Huang 2016). While extant work has demonstrated that rebel groups striving for secession conduct diplomatic relations more often, we know little about non-armed self-determination groups and their choice of strategy.

To substantiate the proposed mechanism, we introduce new data on the diplomatic actions and the use of sovereignty referendums by 149 subnational groups demanding autonomy or independence in 79 countries in the period from 1990 to 2015. The quantitative comparative data allows us to assess global patterns. In order to assess the external validity of the mechanism we select a typical case from the sample, Iraqi Kurdistan, and assess the proposed mechanism for an out-of-sample observation, the 2017 independence referendum. We thus complement our descriptive analysis of global patterns of referendum use with evidence from the case of the Kurdistan region relating to the referendum in 2017. For the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG), the referendum was a way to signal their claim to statehood to the Iraqi state and the group's followers, as well as towards the

international community through emphasis on the democratic constitution and relative stability of the Kurds in a democratizing, but war-torn Iraq.

We proceed by, first, reviewing the state of the literature on subnational self-determination demands, rebel diplomacy, and sovereignty referendums. We then develop our argument, which we assess following the introduction and description of our quantitative and qualitative data. We close by jointly discussing the insights derived from the two analytical steps, as well as highlighting potential for future research.

2. State of the Literature

Our argument speaks to the literatures on the success of self-determination demands, referendum use, and diplomacy by non-state actors. In this section, we briefly review the existing literature in these three areas, and clarify our definitions of core terms.

2.1. Self-Determination

We define self-determination groups as "a group of people that shares a collective identity and believes it has a legitimate right to self-rule" (Cunningham, 2014, p. 13). The demands[3] of these groups have different scopes, ranging from autonomy over specific issue areas, such as taxation or culture, to substantial changes in the structure of governmental decision-making, for instance through the devolution of governmental sovereignty to regional parliaments. In most cases, a range of demands is expressed by different interest groups claiming to represent collective interests. We distinguish between demands for autonomy versus independence or secession as distinct subtypes with different scopes.[4] Groups pursue different strategies to gain self-determination, ranging from conventional

[3] We use the terms demands for self-determination, separatism, self-rule, greater rights, and challenges to national sovereignty synonymously.

[4] We refer to self-determination as a demand for sovereignty vis-à-vis the home state. Decolonization is thus excluded from the analysis as a special type of self-determination-demand. All challenges for self-rule in the twentieth century operate in an environment of rapid change of the international system, pertaining for instance to the security, economic, and norm environment (Fazal & Griffiths, 2014). However, decolonization movements benefitted particularly from the endorsement of the United Nations General Assembly resolution 1514 (XV), which establishes the right to independence of colonial countries and peoples. This right is invoked continually until today, as the ruling of the ICJ in the case of the Chagos Islands in February 2019 illustrates (Bowcott, 2019). Former colonial states thus face different strategic concerns when seeking independence, compared to non-colonial units.

politics[5], such as party formation or lobbying, to large scale insurgencies (Cunningham, 2013b). The presence of group spoilers (Cunningham, 2013a), exclusion from executive decision making at the national level (Cederman, Wimmer, & Min, 2010), the loss of autonomy (Siroky & Cuffe, 2015), and the presence of symbolic territorial attachments (Kelle, 2019a) increase the likelihood that demands escalate.

The quest of subnational groups seeking statehood or greater autonomy has attracted a significant degree of scholarly attention in different subfields. Global changes in the security, economic, and normative international environment have increased benefits of independence that clearly outweigh the costs of statehood, particularly since the end of the Second World War (Fazal & Griffiths, 2014). The potential for membership in multilateral organizations, such as NATO, might reduce the costs for security, while economic organizations, such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) or European Union (EU), may supply economic benefits. Moreover, the integration and institutionalization of the world political system has been accompanied by a transformation of the international policy of recognition. The fact that the right to self-determination is, in principle, acknowledged by the international community as well as in international law has encouraged groups all over the world to strive for independence (Wolff, 2008). State leaders recognize would-be-states strategically in coordination with other system members in order to maximize their internal and external security (Coggins, 2011). At the same time, separatist regions that correspond to unique administrative units and feature clearly identifiable administrative boundaries are more likely to become independent (Griffiths, 2015). Special administrative status, obtained through bargaining with the central government and potentially in a referendum, is thus desirable for would-be states.

2.2. Sovereignty Referendums

Referendums are a global decision making tool employed across regime types, which has received significant attention in the comparative politics literature (Butler & Ranney, 1994; Qvortrup, 2014b). We define sovereignty referendums as "any popular vote on [a reallocation of sovereignty between at least two territorial centers] that is organized by the state or at least by a state-like entity, such as the authorities of a de facto state", where

[5] Conventional politics subsumes electoral politics alongside other approaches such as legal recourse. From this we distinguish nonconventional politics, which might be violent or nonviolent (cf.

sovereignty is "the right to make authoritative political decisions within a territorial unit" (Mendez & Germann, 2016a, pp. 4-5). We include public votes for greater sovereignty on the national level, where existing territorial political entities aim at an independent state or greater regional sovereignty within the host state. This includes both territories, which already enjoy a degree of regional autonomy and strive either for greater autonomy or for independence, as well as those substate units seeking to establish some form of self-governance.

Most of the literature focuses on the domestic conditions of sovereignty referendums (see, for instance, Butler & Ranney, 1994; Qvortrup, 2014c). Research in the context of sub-national ethnic conflict (Qvortrup, 2014a) distinguishes between difference-managing referendums on devolution or power-sharing on the one hand and referendums geared towards secession or partition on the other hand. Difference-managing referendums are conducted where politicians are under electoral threat stemming from limited legitimacy of political decision making. Democratic institutions increase competition, which fosters processes of collective decision making (Qvortrup, 2014a, p. 46). Secessionist referendums, on the other hand, often occur in waves that correlate with moments of instability in the international system. While in isolated cases referendums have contributed to (further) escalation of conflict, such as in former Yugoslavia, war is more the exception than the rule (Qvortrup, 2014c). In fact, where referendums are following negotiation processes and are endorsed by the international community, war is less likely (Qvortrup, 2014a, p. 68).

2.3. (Rebel) Governance and Diplomacy

The rebel governance and diplomacy literature addresses the strategies and incentives of rebel groups that build state-like governance structures (Arjona et al. 2015) and develop diplomacy structures with international actors (Huang, 2016; Sienknecht, 2019). The emerging field of studies analyzing (rebel) group politics mostly focuses on governance approaches at the local level (Arjona, Kasfir, & Mampilly, 2015; Coggins, 2015). Groups frequently build up state-like governance structures to achieve their goals. In case of conflict situations, this has been referred to as "rebel governance" (Arjona et al., 2015, p. 1). By establishing governance structures, rebel groups can increase their acceptance by the civilian population and even build up de facto state-structures. Through this, the respective

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Cunningham, 2013b, p. 292).

group contributes to its legitimacy on the subnational level as it provides the respective public with needed infrastructure and security. Such de facto states, which experience a degree of autonomy from the central government but are missing recognition as a sovereign state, can survive quite long, in spite of weak economies and state structures, due to strong domestic support (Kolstø, 2006). Besides this politics on the subnational level, more recent studies have demonstrated that many groups also conduct foreign relations to members of the international community (e.g. Coggins, 2015; Huang, 2016; Sienknecht, 2018; Sienknecht, 2019).

The concept of "rebel diplomacy" (Coggins, 2015; Huang, 2016) captures the diplomatic relations of rebel groups towards international actors. Via diplomacy, rebel groups signal to international audiences that they are serious political contenders for state power (Huang, 2016, p. 91). This does not only hold true for rebel groups in conflict with a government, but also for peaceful groups, as we can see in the case of international relations of Scotland or Catalonia. Therefore, we define *non–state diplomacy* as a form of engagement by subnational groups to build up relations to external actors, such as states and IOs, with the aim to gain support and legitimacy for their cause.[6]

3. Theoretical Argument: Referendums as signaling tools

How do subnational groups actively promote their bid for autonomy or independence? What role do the varying audiences with which they interact play? We offer the first comprehensive theory to integrate the use of referendums over self-determination into the strategic considerations of subnational groups. We argue that groups are more likely to stage referendums if they can benefit from the signaling effects of international diplomacy and local governance structures. On the state level, the national government is, in the vast majority of cases, the only actor that is effectively able to grant territorial autonomy or independence to a restive subnational population. We therefore claim that the state is the main receiving audience of groups' political activities. It is, however, not the only audience towards which groups have incentives to signal their capacity and legitimacy. Both the international community and the domestic audience are important forces that can potentially exert pressure on the government. The establishment of subnational govern-

[6] In this paper, we will focus on diplomatic relations to IOs and states. Apart from those relations, subnational groups conduct transnational ties to other groups, NGOs, diasporas, etc.

ance structures and the employment of international diplomacy are thus facilitating factors that make the approval of the government more likely. As a result, subnational groups will be more likely to employ referendums to gain greater leverage towards all three audiences when they are able to build on domestic governance structures and tools of international diplomacy. We explicate this mechanism below, deriving expectations regarding the role of the three audiences in the choice of self-determination referendums.

3.1. State Audience

States are the guardians of sovereignty over their territory. While the origins of the modern state system can be traced back to the Peace of Westphalia of 1648, the norm of territorial integrity emerged at the end of the First World War and was widely accepted following the Second World War. The UN Charter of 1945 marks the norm's acceptance by system members (Zacher, 2001, pp. 216–237). States accept the territorial integrity norm for ideational and instrumental reasons: the threat of territorial revisionism, the decline of wars over post-colonial borders, and the incentives of the globalizing economy are among the core motivations (Zacher, 2001, pp. 237–244). Conversely, the self-determination norm, established in 1918, fueled a demand for secessionism by subnational groups, which has not been reflected in states' willingness to grant independence (Griffiths, 2014, pp. 579–580).

How do restive regions obtain sovereignty? Generally speaking, "obtaining the consent of the central government is the surest way to independence" (Griffiths, 2014, p. 580). Ironically, states are more likely to grant independence to restive regions since the establishment of the territorial integrity norm. The state system seeks to maintain political borders, while at the same time largely shielding its members from territorial aggression. The resulting increase in a state's security reduces the incentives to control large territories (Griffiths, 2014, pp. 566–567). The territorial integrity norm is, however, only one factor contributing to an increased willingness of sovereign states to allow secessions from their territory after 1945 (Griffiths, 2014, pp. 559–560). The possibility of stable international collaboration stemming from the bipolar, and later unipolar, character of the state system reduces the appeal of large state territories and economies. Moreover, states no longer require extensive territories to secure economic power and security, due to the emergence of economic globalization and the advent of the nuclear age. Moreover, sepa-

ratist regions that correspond to unique administrative units and feature clearly identifiable administrative boundaries are more likely to become independent – an effective way for states to avoid costly conflict while minimizing the risk of precedent setting towards other potential claimants (Griffiths, 2015). Special administrative status, obtained through bargaining with the central government and potentially in a referendum, is thus desirable for would-be states.

The need to appeal to the central government holds true independent of the scope of the demands subnational groups put forth. Whether it is a maximalist demand for independent statehood, or more narrow claims for limited territorial autonomy: Either way, it is the state, as the sovereign over the territory, who may or may not grant greater rights. Referendums are an attractive tool for separatist groups to gain the consent of governments: They signal the high organizational capacity of the group and legitimacy of the demand, independent of the scope of the demand. Two recent referendums illustrate the appeal of bilaterally agreed referendums in situations with different degrees of radicalism. The referendum in Bougainville in late 2019, which asked voters to choose between autonomy or independence from Papua New Guinea, exemplifies a vote with potentially wide-ranging scope. The 2017 referendums in the Italian regions of Lombardy and Veneto, on the other hand, show how referendums are used to assess support for more modest aims. Voters were called to indicate if they support that the regional representatives use existing institutional means to request more autonomy from the state.

We expect that, independent of the degree of self-determination requested, groups have strong incentives to use any potential means available to pressure the government towards granting concessions. We contend that groups pressure the state government by garnering support on the domestic and international levels through building civic institutions as well as engaging in international diplomacy. The two following sections look into each of these options in turn.

3.2. Domestic Audience

The domestic audience is central for the success of a referendum. If the local people would not support the group's claim for independence or autonomy, the whole endeavor of organizing and conducting a referendum would be nullified. Hence, the group tries to ensure that the local constituency supports their struggle for autonomy or independence by

"hard" and "soft" elements of state-building (Scheindlin, 2012, p. 66). The soft elements refer to constructing a shared (national) identity and sense of unity. This might include a flag or anthem. In this regard, the establishment of governance structures ("hard element") is a sustainable and functional tool, which helps to demonstrate the group's governmental capacities. These governance structures also help to organize a referendum, which needs both the mobilization of people as well as an organizational infrastructure (setting up ballot boxes, organizing polling stations, etc.). Mimicking state behavior domestically is a rational strategy for self-determination groups in order to strengthen their bargaining position vis-à-vis the group audience, the national authorities, and the international community.

But being held accountable by the civilian population for the functioning of the de-facto state or autonomy also entails pitfalls for the group: If the group is not able to provide sufficient quality of infrastructure or equal access to economic benefits for all group-members, the group might be hold responsible for possible political and economic shortcomings.

Therefore, groups might decide to conduct a referendum to strengthen their internal sovereignty (Scheindlin, 2012, p. 67). Furthermore, it can also address the group's local opponents. Given the fact that most self-determination groups do not govern unquestioned, but rather often face internal opposing groups, a referendum, if highly supported by the local people, serves as an important signal of the regional foothold of the organization and might therefore limit the aspirations of other groups. The legitimacy granted by the referendum helps to silence opposition groups and underlines the unity between the political demands of the group and the people (Scheindlin, 2012, p. 66).

Assuming that internal sovereignty is a necessary precondition for external sovereignty, then addressing the domestic audience represents a decisive element on the "secessionist continuum" (Voller, 2014, p. 15).[7] By demonstrating unity within the political community towards the central government and constructing a distinct identity than that of the state, the group strengthens the differences between the core state and the aspiring state. This is often accompanied by the building of governance structures, which might

[7] Voller develops a continuum of secession, "in which the starting point is the emergence of the separatist movement engaged in a liberation struggle, and the end point is the formal independence and diplomatic recognition. The de facto state is an advanced stage on the continuum." (Voller, 2014, p. 15).

parallel the state structures. By showing that the de-facto state is fully or partly able to organize relevant state structures, the group exerts pressure on the central government.

We expect that, by building state-like institutions domestically, groups arebetter able to garner support by the group members residing in the potential sovereign territory. The construction and maintenance of domestic institutions, we claim, should therefore foster the willingness of the groups to hold a referendum over sovereignty.

3.3. International Audience

When do separatists receive external support? While states might plausibly provide external support when challenges to national sovereignty undermine their adversaries and do not constitute a threat to regional stability and international norms, ethnic ties between discriminated challenger groups and external supporters are the most robust predictor of international involvement (Saideman, 2002). Foreign state supporters, however, are not the most effective influencers of claimants' conflict strategies. Groups that employ nonviolent strategies are more likely to receive support from transnational diaspora groups (Petrova, 2019). International organizations also play a role in subnational challenges to sovereignty. The UN gets involved in nonviolent conflicts over self-determination that have a violent history and have the potential do diffuse regionally (White, Cunningham, & Beardsley, 2018).

In order to ensure their territorial integrity, states might be reluctant to grant autonomy and particularly disinclined to allow independence to restive regions. At the same time, the territorial integrity norm alleviates the requirement to hold large territories for economic or security reasons (Griffiths, 2014, pp. 566-567). In order to gain governmental consent, groups have incentives to deliberately appeal to the international community to support their quest for self-determination. International support, we contend, is crucial to tip the balance of governmental incentive structures into the separatists' favor. Indeed, secessionist rebels benefit from formal recognition by great powers in their bids for independent statehood (Huang, 2016, pp. 102-103).

Building on Huang (2016), we argue that groups use international diplomacy in order to establish relations with potential secessionism sponsors. Diplomacy is thus a means to communicate the competency of independent statehood in the international context (O'Driscoll, 2019, p. 6; Scheindlin, 2012, p. 79). Diplomatic relations facilitate communica-

tion between groups and their (potential) sponsors, while at the same time signaling the capacity of a groups to act analogous to a (democratic) state in the international arena. Caspersen (2008) argues that democracy is an important reference point when addressing the international community. To involve people via direct participation is thus a decisive democratic process. The international travels by Scottish Prime Minister Nicola Sturgeon to further business and political relations with other states and regions aptly illustrate that would-be states take these international connections seriously. In order to generate support from international actors, groups refer to international norms, such as human rights, democracy and the right to self-determination, to underline their congruence with the world political system (Sienknecht 2018; 2019).

We expect that if a group establishes diplomatic relations (e.g. successfully sending emissaries to relevant international actors), then a referendum becomes more likely. Via the establishment of foreign affairs to actors of the world political system, the group demonstrates its state-like behavior both internally and externally. The goal is to gain support and legitimacy from international actors for their cause and to ease the way for conducting a referendum. Strengthening the bargaining position towards the state government through international endorsement, we argue, is beneficial in negotiation processes for territorial autonomy and fosters mobilization of group members for the separatist cause. Diplomatic relations and a positive vote on the referendum can then translate into a better bargaining position towards the national government.

3.4. Scope Conditions

We specify two scope conditions for our theory, which relate to the observation of signaling attempts to target audiences, as well as the constraints to domestic and international acceptance of sovereignty demands.

First, our core argument is that groups conduct self-determination referendums if they can rely on domestic institutions and international diplomacy, which exert pressure on the central government to accept the bid for autonomy or independence. Domestic institutions and international diplomacy therefore serve as signals of (potential) statehood to the state, domestic, and international audiences. This argument assumes that the group does not only send the signal, but that it is also received by the target audience, and, subsequently, interpreted as intended. We make this assumption regarding all three audiences

to which the groups signals. We cannot assess this communicative relation in the quantitative part of our data collection, but evidence from the case study allows us to trace this process of information exchange.

Second, the capacity of self-determination groups to gain autonomy or independence through signaling is limited, even when maximal support by the domestic audience exists. This is, in part, because the host state has incentives to avoid its dissolution and consequently seeks to avoid precedent setting (Bormann & Savun, 2018; Walter, 2006). Therefore, effective sovereignty and control over a piece of land is insufficient for the recognition as a full state. On the other hand, conceiving of the international system as a social place sheds light on why "[m]ost states-to-be are socially promoted and accepted as full system members before their domestic-level conflicts have concluded" (Coggins, 2011, p. 435). Would-be-states' identification with the system, as well as their alignment with norms and qualities, do not guarantee recognition by a critical mass of system members. Recognition, Coggins shows, depends on state interests in maximizing their external security, discouraging domestic precedent setting, and alignment with Great Power behavior. State preferences over the recognition of separatists are thus conditional on self-interested motives, which stem from international power relations and, to some degree, domestic concerns. In this account of state birth, state interests limit the agency of subnational groups in furthering their demands for sovereignty.

4. Research Design

We combine large scale comparative data with case study evidence, which allow us to assess differences across cases as well as the internal validity of the proposed mechanism in an individual case. While the quantitative data allow us to gauge empirical patterns across cases over time, the case of the 2017 referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan is an out of sample observation that enables us to establish external validity and trace the mechanism within the case.

4.1. Dataset

Data collection is based on Kelle (2016), who codes strategy choices, demands, and structural information on groups demanding autonomy or independence from the state for the period of 2005 to 2015. We extend these data backwards to 1990 using Cunningham (2014).

These two data sets provide a comprehensive and consistent take of the various strategies and characteristics of subnational groups demanding self-determination on a global scale. Both are based on Peace and Conflict Reports of the Center for International Development and Conflict Management (CIDCM) at the University of Maryland (see, for instance, Marshall & Gurr, 2005), and therefore employ the same definition of self-determination groups. The definition of groups included in the dataset reflects a certain degree of aggregation common in the discipline. This is in line with existing datasets on ethnic and subnational groups, such as the Ethnic Power Relations data (Cederman et al., 2010), the Minorities at Risk data (Gurr, 1993), Cunningham's data on self-determination groups (Cunningham, 2014), or the self-determination movements data by (Sambanis, Germann, & Schädel, 2018). While we acknowledge the potential loss of nuance incurred by aggregation, we are mindful of the advantages that come with jointly assessing groups that are similar on critical dimensions. We provide a list of groups in the Appendix.

We use the end of the Cold War as an intuitive starting point for left censoring (Huang 2016: 110). Existing work has established that international diplomacy and the methods of operation of the United Nations, and particularly the Security Council, have changed since 1990 (Qvortrup, 2018, p. 12). The time of analysis, 1990 to 2015, allows us to trace the dynamics of external support and diplomacy by separatist challengers over an extended period of time. Our unit of analysis is the state-group-year. By integrating the two data collections by Kelle and Cunningham we cover n = 3,309 observations.

Dependent Variable

The dependent variable is the occurrence of sovereignty referendums involving the political status of the respective self-determination group. We use the binary variable *referendum incidence*, which is coded 1 for every year when a referendum was held in the group's region regarding the reallocation of sovereignty of this unit, and 0 otherwise. The coding of the variable is based on Mendez and Germann (2016b), who list all referendums concerned with the transfer of sovereignty rights to the subnational or supranational level between 1776 and 2012. We are only interested in referendums concerned with sovereignty transfer from the national to the subnational level and vice versa between 1990 and 2012, and extend the existing data to 2015 based on Qvortrup (2014a) and various secondary sources, ranging from news reports to academic journal articles. Sovereignty referen-

dums are usually conducted in the region controlled by the territorially concentrated self-determination group.

Explanatory Variables

The core set of explanatory variables is concerned with diplomatic action by subnational groups demanding self-rule. We follow Huang (2016) in distinguishing three binary components: a foreign affairs arm, offices abroad, and the dispatch of emissaries. These three time-varying elements of diplomacy represent institutionalized diplomatic tools. The coding is based on the Rebel Governance Datatset by Huang (2016) and the extension of the dataset by Sienknecht (2019). Both datasets refer to conflicts as the unit of analysis and not to self-determination groups, covering conflicts until 2006. Consequently, we adjusted the data for all three types of diplomacy on a yearly basis backwards until 1990 and expanded it until 2015 for both violent and nonviolent self-determination groups. For the coding, we used sources like LexisNexis, social media data of the groups, UN documents, and information from other datasets, such as UCDP (Uppsala Conflict Data Program, 2017) and MAR (Minorities at Risk Project, 2009), as well as secondary sources. As Huang only refers to rebel groups in armed conflicts, we used MAROB data (Wilkenfeld, Asal, & Pate, 2008) to close the gap between organizations and groups. All three dimensions of the diplomacy variable are dummy variables, coded with 1 if the group established either a foreign affairs arm, opened offices abroad, or sent emissaries abroad, and 0 if otherwise.

To enhance the transparency of the coding, we provide text samples or references for each coding decision.[8] We assume that diplomacy is critical for achieving recognition, which, in turn, is a crucial condition for statehood. Diplomacy strengthens bargaining power with the national government and fosters the mobilization of group members for the separatist cause. We expect that the establishment of diplomacy structures by self-determination groups serves as a signaling tool to communicate the competencies for statehood to both the national and international fora, which makes the staging of a referendum more likely.

Moreover, the establishment of governance structures on the local level is decisive for exercising pressure on the national government. In an ongoing coding effort, we col-

[8] Extensive supplementary documentation will be made available upon publication.

lect data on domestic governance structures established by subnational contestants of state power.

Covariates

First, the *violence* variable indicates whether the group was engaged in armed conflict in a given year. This dummy variable is coded 1 if we observe violence involving at least 25 battle related deaths in a given year, and 0 otherwise. From 1990 to 2004 the variable is taken from Cunningham (2013b), and from Kelle (2016) for 2005 to 2015. In both data sources, data collection is based on the UCDP Armed Conflict Database. We argue that the employment of armed conflict strategies undermines the state government's willingness to compromise and thus reduces the likelihood of a referendum. Moreover, whether violent behavior of subnational groups is considered self-defense or an act of aggression by the international community greatly influences the international position towards that group, which might also influence the decision of the group to stage a referendum.

Second, the *independence demand* variable is a binary measure indicating the scope of the self-determination demand in a given year. It is coded 1 if demands for independence are predominant, and 0 if autonomy is the central claim. For observations between 1990 and 2004, information is based on Cunningham (2014). For 2005 to 2015, the data are taken from on Kelle (2019b). We expect secessionist groups that seek to establish an independent state to have stronger incentives to conduct a sovereignty referendum compared to groups with more modest goals.

Third, we include the *regime type* of the state in which the group is based in the analysis. This variable is based on the Polity IV scale, that ranges from -10 to +10 (Marshall, Jaggers, & Gurr, 2011). We recode the variable to a binary variable, which assumes the value 0 if the state is an autocracy (-10 to +5 on the original scale), and 1 for democracies (+6 to +10). We expect that groups that are based in more democratic states have higher incentives to hold a referendum in order to signal their commitment to democratic norms and procedures.

4.2. Case Study – Iraqi Kurdistan

In order to illustrate the theoretical framework that we established above, we analyze a representative case from the sample, Iraqi Kurdistan, and assess the proposed mechanism

for an out-of-sample observation: the 2017 independence referendum. We contextualize the analysis to the developments of the 1990s leading to the referendum.

We argue that the decision of the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) to conduct the referendum in 2017 was driven by three main factors: First, developments on the subnational level, like the political and economic discontent of the people, the desire for independence in the Kurdish population, and the growing contestation of the KRGs legitimacy by the Gorran-party. The referendum was used to set a sentiment of unity between the Kurdish populations in the areas controlled by the two main parties, KDP and PUK, and to underline the power of the KRG. Second, in light of the territorial gains of the Kurds in the aftermath of their fight against ISIS, the Kurdish authorities wanted to use their new power to pressure the Iraqi government to recognize the reality of Kurdish governmental structures. The third factor, which influenced the decision to stage the referendum, was the belief to receive support from the U.S. and other international actors in light of close diplomatic ties and the joint fight against ISIS.

This representative case is well suited to assess the proposed mechanism because it is well documented due to the political work of Kurdish organizations and the attention the case received from international actors. We are therefore able to refer to different sources, including scholarly studies, international news articles, and historical analysis. Furthermore, we conducted interviews with experts on the Kurdish case and representatives of the KRG, which helps us to draw conclusions about the motivations and underlying determinants that led to the referendum in 2017. If our theoretical assumptions hold true, then we should be able to identify an effect of the deployment of diplomatic relations on the staging of the referendum in 2017.

5. Empirical Patterns

We assess the relation between sovereignty referendums by subnational groups and their international diplomacy on a global comparative scale for the period 1990 – 2015. In what follows we present the global comparative patterns on the core variables of interest introduced in the preceding section and supplement the descriptive trends with evidence from our case study of Iraqi Kurdistan.

5.1. Descriptive Statistics

Table 1 provides an overview of the distribution of core variables in the dataset. Individual observations correspond to state-group-years. Out of the 3309 observations, 51 groups held a referendum between 1990 and 2015. This corresponds to 149 groups in 78 countries. A little more than half of the observations operate in a democracy, and in 60% of observations demands for independence are more prevalent than claims for (greater) autonomy. Data on strategy choice are available for about 80% of the observations. The share of violent groups is relatively low. Less than 20% of the groups-years for which we have information are engaged in armed conflict. The variables measuring international diplomacy, the core explanatory variable, are available for about 90% of the observations. Foreign affairs arms are the most common type of diplomacy, with one third of the observations maintaining governance institutions concerned with international relations. About a quarter of all observations establish representation abroad and an about equal number send ambassadors to other states. Descriptively, international diplomacy is relatively common amongst self-determination groups since the end of the Cold War. In an ongoing coding effort, we collect further information on domestic institution building.

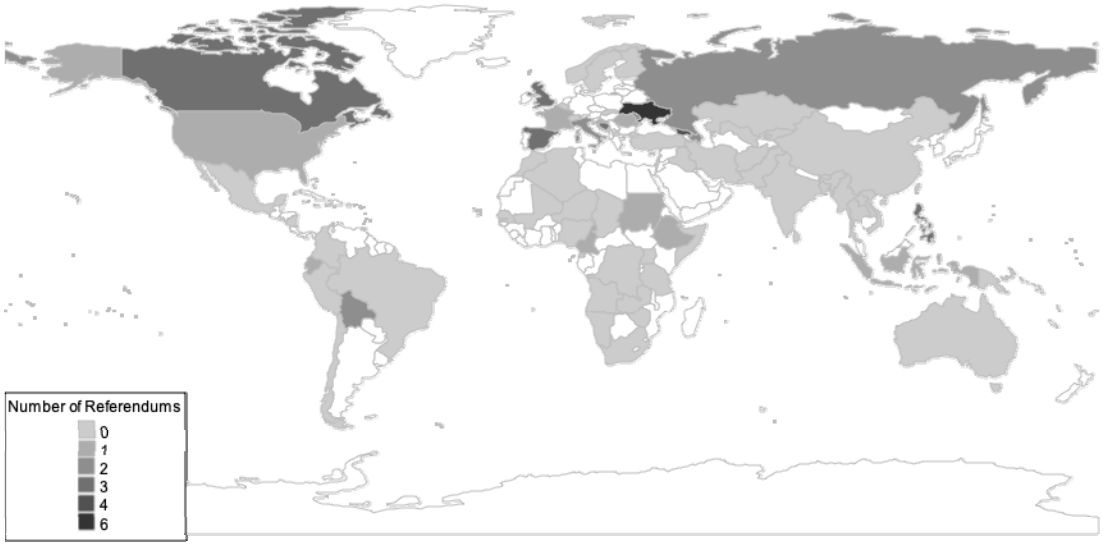
Table 1: Descriptive Statistics

	N	min	max	mean	SD	sum
Dependent variable						
Referendum	3309	0	1	.02	.12	51
Explanatory Variable						
Office abroad	2919	0	1	.24	.43	699
Emissary	2919	0	1	.23	.42	671
Foreign affairs arm	2919	0	1	.34	.47	981
Covariates						
Violence	2704	0	1	.19	.39	504
Independence demand	3060	0	1	.60	.49	1848
Democracy	3309	0	1	.54	.5	1788

5.2. Referendums

Figure 1 maps the distribution of referendum events recorded in our data. We plot the average number of referendums across all groups in a given country and average this value for the period 1990 to 2015. Overall, we observe 51 referendums over the course of the 26 years. The map shows that sovereignty referendums occur across world regions. In the last quarter of a century, however, most public votes over self-determination have been conducted in democratic regimes, with about 70% of the observations. The 2006 referendum of Armenians in Azerbaijan is an example of a referendum over subnational sovereignty held in an autocratic state.[9] A few states have seen multiple referendums over time, sometimes by the same group. This includes Canada, the United Kingdom, Spain, Bosnia, Yugoslavia, Ukraine, Georgia, and the Philippines. In the United Kingdom, for instance, both Wales and Scotland held autonomy referendums in 1997, while Scotland held an independence referendum in 2014.

Figure 1: Average number of referendums by country over time



[9] Azerbaijan is assigned a value of -7 for the year 2006 in the Polity2 score (Marshall et al., 2011).

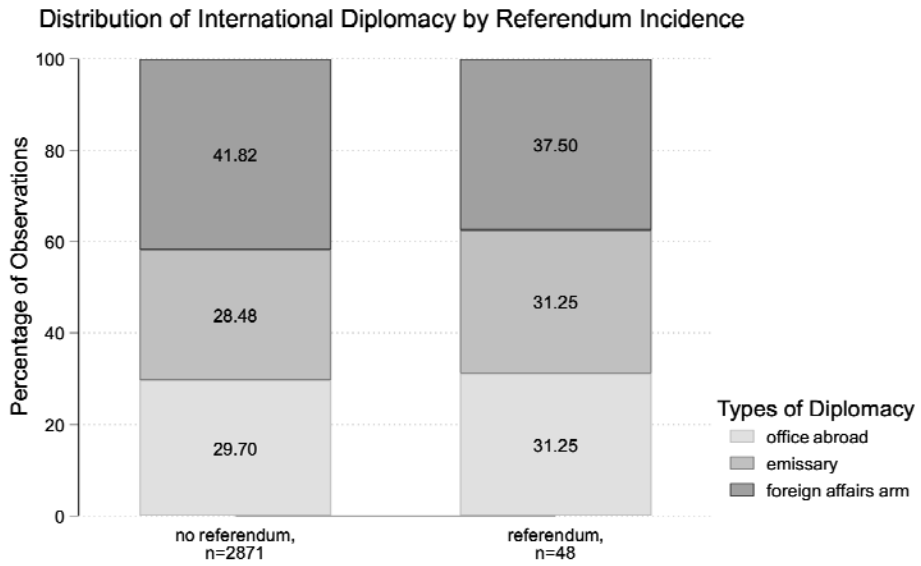
While the map shows the average over time by country, assessing variation across groups also provides valuable insight. In some of the groups in our data no referendum was ever held in the period of analysis, while in others one, two, or more referendums are conducted. The maximum number of referendums by a group in the sample is three. These cases include, for instance, Catalans in Spain and South Ossetians in Georgia. With about three-quarters of the groups never experiencing a referendum, this category is the most common of the three. Conducting a referendum – either unilaterally or with governmental approval – is thus no matter of course. Rather, we claim that those groups holding referendums are qualitatively different from those not having a public vote. These differences might lie in a particularly high degree of organizational and mobilization capacity, an accommodative central government, or favorable opportunity structures. The divergence in capacity and institutional setup when moving from zero to one or more referendums is therefore not linear. This also applies to the categories of one and two or more referendums. Those groups conducting two or more referendums are likely systematically different from those that get to vote only once. The former might either be engaged in a long-term devolution process involving public votes, such as Scotland, or be determined in spite of an unaccommodating central government, such as Iraqi Kurdistan.

In Iraqi Kurdistan, President Masoud Barzani announced a referendum on the independence of Kurdistan from Iraq in 2014, but postponed it after a request by the former U.S. Foreign Minister John Kerry to wait until after the defeat of ISIS. The Kurds concurred and after ISIS had been beaten back by the U.S.-led coalition, they held a unilateral referendum in 2017 on the question of secession from the Iraqi state. The population of the Federate State of Kurdistan, as well as the Kurds living in disputed areas, were eligible to vote. President Masoud Barzani announced that the immediate goal of the referendum was to start a negotiation process with the Iraqi government about independence, but he stopped short of actually declaring that a positive outcome would trigger Kurdish independence from Iraq (Kaplan, 2019, p. 35). An overwhelming majority of the population voted in favor of a separation from Iraq (92% voted yes with a voter turnout of 70%).

5.3. Diplomacy

We argue that international diplomacy by subnational groups is a crucial tool to gain support by the international community. The goal is to exert pressure on the national government to grant concessions to the restive separatists. Figure 2 summarizes the distribution of referendums across types of international diplomacy. Note that the three diplomacy variables are not available for all observations. Three referendum events are therefore missing from this figure[10]. In this cross case setting we find limited variation across observations holding referendums and those not staging public votes. In the years where referendums were held, groups maintain offices abroad and send emissaries abroad slightly more frequently than in the absence of referendums. Foreign affairs arms, however, are somewhat more frequent in the latter case.

Figure 2: Distribution of International Diplomacy by Referendum Incidence



International diplomacy plays a crucial role in the Kurdish context. Since 1992, the Iraqi Kurds maintained diplomatic relations with a variety of international actors. Both Barzani and Talabani made several diplomatic visits to different heads of state (McDowall, 2004, p.

[10] The three events are referendums in Crimea in 1991, 1994 and 2014.

385). In 1994, they opened offices in Turkey and gradually expanded their representations to a network of 14 offices all over the world. In 2015, the Iraqi Kurds had established representation in several Western countries (www.dfr.gov.krd), of which the offices in Germany, France, and the U.S. are regarded as the most important ones by the Kurdish authorities (Interview A). The KRG established the Department of Foreign Relations (DFR) in September 2006 to conduct relations with the international community. Today, the DFR is an integral part of the Kurdish government, with a wide-ranging portfolio of responsibilities.

In order to generate support from international actors, the Kurdish authorities consistently referred to international norms such as human rights, democracy, and the rule of law. The goal was to emphasize their congruence with the world political system (Interview B) and their character as a democratic society. The Kurds labelled themselves as the sole democratic entity in the Middle East that takes international norms seriously. They frame themselves as democratic and reliable partners in a troubled Middle East and as the natural partner for Western alliances. With this westernized identity construction, the Kurds tried to draw a clear boundary between themselves and the Iraqi government, and neighboring states alike.

The perceived success of this effort was confirmed when the Kurds collaborated with the U.S. led coalition fighting ISIS. The Peshmerga was the most important military unit in Iraq with fighting experience and a functioning organizational structure. The joint fight against ISIS, the postponed referendum in 2014 as a reaction to the request of the U.S., and the strong diplomatic relations to international supporters made the Kurdish authorities believe that their supporters would also back their push for independence.

Diplomatic relations and international support were a crucial factor in deciding to hold the referendum in 2017 (Interview A). While ISIS was almost defeated, the Kurds assumed that the referendum should take place before international attention would vanish. However, with the exception of Israel, the international community unanimously opposed the referendum and argued for a unified State of Iraq. Despite the Kurdish authorities being aware of the missing support from their Western allies, they chose to conduct the referendum anyway. The interviews clearly show that the KRG at least considered that the U.S. and other allies would tolerate the status quo (meaning the territorial gains of the Kurds after fighting ISIS) and prevent an escalation with Baghdad (Interview A, B, C). Some

analysts have argued that the KRG has overestimated the effects of its lobbying in Western states and trusted those who provided a distorted picture of international support for Kurdish independence (Kaplan, 2019: 37).

The Kurdish case falls in line with our finding that there is a higher probability of a referendum if a group sends emissaries abroad or establishes a foreign affairs arm. Somewhat puzzling, the quantitative analysis suggests that a referendum becomes less likely when the group maintains offices abroad. The case study did not shed any light on this finding and leaves ample room for future research in this direction. Furthermore, the subnational situation and a possible contestation of power should be taken into account in a further study. It is conceivable that the decision to stage a referendum might also be influenced by internal struggles for legitimacy and power.

5.4. Domestic Institutions

Alongside international diplomacy, we argue, the establishment of domestic institutions is key for understanding why self-determination groups conduct sovereignty referendums. Since 1991, Kurdish parties had favored a federal system, in which they could govern a certain territory (Jongerden, 2019, p. 65). In the same year, Kurdish parties joined the US-backed Iraqi National Congress (INC) and organized elections for a provisional parliament. In 1992, the Kurdish parliament called for a Federated State of Kurdistan within a democratic parliamentary Iraq, although the elections were framed as illegitimate by the Iraqi government (Bengio, 2012, p. 202 f.). The Kurdish elections in 1992 fulfilled functions on two different levels: On the one hand, they conferred legitimacy on the Kurdish leadership and stabilized the Kurdish administration against opposing Kurdish organizations. On the other hand, the elections signaled to the international community that the majority of the Kurdish population supported the Kurdish government.

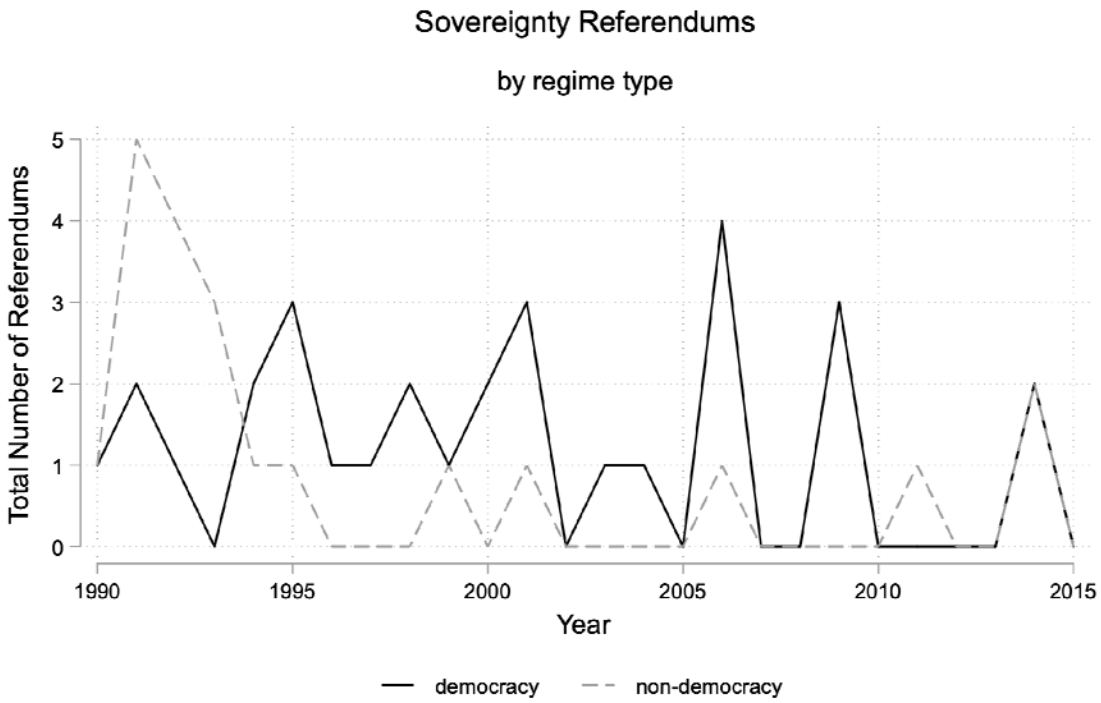
The Kurdistan National Assembly formed a Kurdish cabinet, which included fifteen ministries, including a ministry for military affairs. Three Kurdish governors were appointed to the provinces of Erbil, Sulaymaniyya, and Duhok. This paralleling of state structures addressed also the legal and educational system. A court of appeals was established in 1992; and huge investments were made for the renewal of the educational system (Bengio, 2012, p. 203). By the end of 1992, the governance structures of the Kurdish authorities had materialized.

In the aftermath of the fall of the regime of Saddam Hussein in 2003, the Kurdistan Autonomous Region was officially acknowledged as a federal part of Iraq in the Iraqi Constitution (2005).

5.5. Regime Type

Our argument states that conducting a referendum often follows the establishment of foreign relations. This argument accounts for the incidence of referendums, but not for their timing. We contend that the existing regime type is critical to account for the timing of referendum votes for sovereignty. In democratizing states, the reference to democratic values becomes more salient, while subnational contenders are increasingly aggrieved due to the lack of democratic concessions by the central government. Referendums are often held where politicians face electoral discontent, centered on insufficient legitimacy of their decision making (Qvortrup, 2014a, p. 46). Figure 3 plots the distribution of referendums between 1990 and 2015, distinguishing between democratic and non-democratic states. Of the 51 referendums in the data, 30 are held in democracies and 21 in non-democracies. While we consistently observe referendums in democracies over time, the early 1990s show a spikes in the frequency of votes in non-democracies, which is related to the dissolution of Yugoslavia.

Figure 3: Referendum Events by Regime Type, 1990 to 2015



In terms of democratization, the Iraqi regime improved since the fall of Saddam Hussein. However, due to continuous violence between different fractions in the country and the oppression of the Sunnis and Kurds by the central government, Iraq scores "3" on the polity index from 2010 until 2013, which describes an "anocracy" (a mixed authority regime). In 2014, the score improved to "6", signifying a democratic regime. Indeed, the data show an improvement in the democratic nature of the Iraqi government. The decision to stage a referendum by the Kurdish authorities falls in line with the democratization of Iraq and the goal of demonstrating the democratization of the KRG and its followers. Interestingly, Kurdish officials described the developments in Iraq as a move towards an illiberal and suppressive regime, rather than towards democracy. According to our interviews, the political developments in Iraq and the perceived move towards autocracy, especially under Premier Minister Nuri al-Maliki who furthered the suppression of Kurdish and Sunni minorities, influenced the decision to conduct the referendum (Interview A, Interview B). Furthermore, the old parties, KDP and PUK, faced a contestation of their legitimacy by the emergence of a new party, Gorran. Gorran finished second in the Iraqi Kurdistan parliamentary elections in 2009 and 2013, thereby challenging the authority of the KRG. Some analysists state that the staging of the referendum in 2014 was a reaction to the strengthening of the new party and an attempt to distract from questions about the legitimacy of the KRG (O'Driscoll, 2019).

While the case stresses the importance of the perceived change of access to political representation, it also shows that the relationship between regime types that are in flux and the staging of referendums should be analyzed in more detail. This refers especially to the difference between a regime change perceived by the group and a de facto regime change. Both in the case of Catalonia as well as Kurdistan, groups perceived a shift towards more autocratic structures before they conducted their referendums.

6. Future Research

We offer the first study to systematically assess the repercussions of the signaling by groups demanding autonomy or independence from the state towards the international

community and their domestic audiences. This allows us to link different levels of analysis, which are usually considered separately in the relevant literature. In a nutshell, we argue that referendums fulfill different functions on different levels for the groups' aim for independence: First, it legitimizes the groups' claim for greater autonomy or independence by including the broader public (domestic audience level). Second, it shows the government the determination of the groups' case (state audience). Third, it helps to signal to the international community the group's high regard of democratic values (international audience). We argued that the establishment of governance structures on the subnational level and the development of diplomacy structures towards international actors fulfill complementary functions. While groups build up governance structures to secure domestic support by group members, they conduct international diplomacy in search of external support. Both strategies make their quest for autonomy or independence more likely. We present a first glimpse at new global comparative data on different diplomatic tools employed by subnational groups between 1990 and 2015. The combination of evidence from a global sample of self-determination groups and a case study of the 2017 referendum in Iraqi Kurdistan allow us to trace the relation between diplomacy and referendums both within and across cases.

Several issues remain for future research, some of which we address in passing in this study. First, while we assess the *regime type* in which groups operate in the global comparative analysis, the case study suggests that changes in the institutional and procedural setup of the host state might be critical in accounting for the strategic situation of subnational contenders. By staging separatist referenda, subnational groups arguably signal to the international community that they are state-like entities and are thus worthy of support and solidarity. We assume that this is particularly true in democratizing states, where separatist groups and the respective government are engaged in a "democratization race". At the same time, it is plausible that subnational groups would also conduct a referendum to underline their democratic character in the face of a government that is sliding into autocracy. What both cases have in common is that the government regimes are in flux, which opens political leeway for the subnational group.

Second, our approach to *diplomatic action* by subnational self-determination groups focuses on institutionalized and official forms of diplomatic interaction with international actors. Diplomats represent the officially sanctioned account of events. Unofficial channels, on the other hand, might be more promising in delicate situations, for instance

when, for security reasons, an agreement with the subnational challenger in an autocratic regime is prioritized. As we are interested in the visible signaling function of diplomacy, the official channels are of the greatest interest to us. In future work, assessing unofficial networks may, however, shed more light on the relevance of different types of international ties that self-determination groups engage in.

Third, we focus on diplomatic action to assess groups' capacity to signal eligibility for membership in the international system through their adherence to democratic norms and procedures. A systematic assessment of *domestic governance structures* that groups establish on their territory will help us to shed light on how these institutions create legitimacy and garnering support for the bid for self-determination domestically. At the same time, these structures plausibly constitute an alternative means of signaling the capacity of the region to fulfill state functions towards the central government as well as the international community. The case of Iraqi Kurdistan suggests that the domestic institutions in Iraqi Kurdistan are central for a shared Kurdish identity and the support of the local people. At the same time, dissatisfaction of the (younger) people with career opportunities and general economic development emerged. Furthermore, challenging local political developments, such as the success of the Gorran party, were addressed by the KRG when conducting a referendum. In light of this, the referendum can also be seen as a way for the KRG to demonstrate its unity with the local constituency and to distract from problems on the ground. The quest for independence mobilizes the population along a meta-level and helps to cover possible economic and political shortcomings and problems.

Fourth, not all referendums are officially sanctioned by the state government. *Unilateral referendums* are more likely in situations where governments are not willing to accommodate the subnational challengers, for instance if the referendum outcome is perceived as a threat towards national level power. Bilaterally agreed referendums, on the other hand, are plausibly more likely in situations where self-determination groups are more likely to be accommodated through institutional means in the first place, or where the expected outcome of the referendum is not perceived as a threat by the central government. In the case of Iraqi Kurdistan, a unilateral referendum was conducted, which – in the end – put the KRG in a worse position than before the referendum. The Iraqi government, under Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi (2014-2018), forcefully took back the Kurdish territorial gains, which were made during the conflict with ISIS. This included the city of Kirkuk and other disputed territories, as well as the oil fields, which also had economic

consequences. “Essentially the Kurds lost all the gains they made from 2003 and went from a relatively strong negotiating position with Baghdad prior to the referendum to a position of weakness, which has been compounded by internal Kurdish division” (O’Driscoll & Baser, 2019, p. 11).

Fifth, combining a quantitative comparative analysis and a qualitative case study helps us to understand under what conditions subnational groups use referendums as a political tool and which role the establishment of diplomacy structures play in this regard. This combination of methods allows us to directly address an important concern with the argument and research design. It might be argued that issues with *endogeneity* arise from the possibility that referendums are more likely where there is more external support for independence. While this argument is theoretically plausible, our qualitative evidence uncovers little empirical evidence in favor of this notion. The case of Iraqi Kurdistan shows that the referendum was conducted in spite of low support rates, and the explicit advice against the referendum by their ally, the U.S. Counterexamples exist: The 2011 referendum on the independence of South Sudan was administered by the UN as part of the peace process. The interplay between the national and international level needs more elaboration.

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Appendix

Table A1: Interviews (February 2019 – September 2019)

Interview	Base/Date	Description
A	Berlin, 15.05.2019	Representative of the Kurdistan Regional Government
B	Berlin, 20.02.2019	Expert on Iraqi Kurdistan
C	Washington, 16.09.2019	Representative of the Kurdistan Regional Government

Table A2: Groups and Referendums in the Dataset

Country	Group	Time period in sample		Referendum	Referendum year
Afghanistan	Tajiks	1990	2015	0	
Afghanistan	Uzbek	1990	2015	0	
Algeria	Berbers	1990	2015	0	
Angola	Bakongo	2005	2015	0	
Angola	Cabindans	1990	2015	0	
Australia	Aborigines	1990	2015	0	
Azerbaijan	Armenians	1991	2015	1	1991, 2006
Azerbaijan	Lezgins	1991	2015	0	
Bangladesh	Chittagong Hill Tribes	1990	2015	0	
Belgium	Fleming	1990	2015	0	
Belgium	Walloon	1990	2015	0	
Bhutan	Ethnic Nepalese/Lhotshampas	1990	2015	0	
Bolivia	Aymara	1990	2015	1	2009
Bolivia	Quechua	1990	2015	1	2009
Bosnia	Bosnian Serbs	1992	2015	1	1993, 1994
Bosnia	Croats	1992	2015	1	2000
Brazil	Amazonian Indians	1990	2015	0	
Burma	Arakanese/Rohingya	1990	2015	0	
Burma	Kachins	1990	2015	0	
Burma	Karenni	1990	2005	0	
Burma	Karens	1990	2015	0	
Burma	Mons	1990	2015	0	

Burma	Shan	1990	2015	0	
Burma	Wa	1990	2015	0	
Burma	Zomis/Chins	1990	2015	0	
Cameroon	Westerner/Anglophone/Southern Cameroons	1990	2015	1	1995
Canada	Indigenous	1990	2015	1	1992, 1995
Canada	Quebecois	1990	2015	1	1995
Chad	Southerners	1990	2015	0	
Chile	Indigenous peoples	1990	2015	0	
China	Mongolian	1990	2015	0	
China	Tibetans	1990	2015	0	
China	Uygur	1990	2015	0	
Colombia	Indigenous peoples	1990	2015	0	
Croatia	Serbs	1991	2015	1	1993
Cyprus	Turks	1990	2015	1	2004
DRC	Lunda-Yeke	1990	2015	0	
Djibouti	Afar	1990	2015	0	
Ecuador	Lowland (Amazonian) Indigenous Peoples	1990	2015	1	2000
Equatorial Guinea	Bube/Bubi	1990	2015	0	
Ethiopia	Afar	1990	2015	0	
Ethiopia	Eritreans	1990	1993	1	1993
Ethiopia	Oromo	1990	2015	0	
Ethiopia	Somali (Ogaden)	1990	2015	0	
Finland	Saami	1990	2005	0	
France	Basques	1990	2015	0	
France	Bretons	1990	2015	0	
France	Corsicans	1990	2015	1	2003
Georgia	Abkhazians	1991	2015	1	1999
Georgia	Adzhars	1991	2015	0	
Georgia	Ossetians (South)	1991	2015	1	1992, 2001, 2006
India	Assamese	1990	2015	0	
India	Bodos/Kachari	1990	2015	0	
India	Kashmiri Muslims	1990	2015	0	
India	Mizos/Lushai	1990	2015	0	
India	Nagas	1990	2015	0	
India	Scheduled Tribes of East India	2005	2015	0	
India	Scheduled Tribes of North India	2005	2015	0	
India	Scheduled Tribes of Northeast India	2005	2015	0	
India	Scheduled Tribes of South India	2005	2015	0	
India	Scheduled Tribes of West India	2005	2015	0	
India	Sikhs	1990	2015	0	
India	Tripuras	1990	2015	0	

Indonesia	Aceh	1990	2015	0	
Indonesia	Dayaks	2005	2015	0	
Indonesia	East Timorese	1990	1999	1	1999
Indonesia	Papuans	1990	2015	0	
Iran	Kurds	1990	2015	0	
Iraq	Kurds	1990	2015	0	
Israel	Palestinian	1990	2015	0	
Italy	Sardinians	1990	2015	1	2001
Italy	South Tyrolians	1990	2015	1	2001
Kazakhstan	Russians	1991	2005	0	
Kyrgyzstan	Uzbek	1991	2015	0	
Laos	Hmong	1990	2005	0	
Lebanon	Palestinians	2005	2015	0	
Macedonia	Albanians	1991	2015	0	
Mali	Touareg	1990	2015	0	
Mexico	Mayans	2005	2015	0	
Mexico	Other indigenous	2005	2015	0	
Mexico	Zapotecs	2005	2015	0	
Moldova	Gagauz	1991	2015	1	1991, 1995
Moldova	Slavs	1991	2015	0	
Montenegro	Albanian	2006	2015	0	
Morocco	Saharawis	1990	2015	0	
Namibia	East Caprivians/Lozi	1990	2015	0	
Nicaragua	Indigenous peoples	1990	2015	0	
Niger	Tuareg	1990	2015	0	
Nigeria	Ibo	1990	2015	0	
Nigeria	Ijaw	1990	2015	0	
Nigeria	Ogoni	1990	2015	0	
Nigeria	Yoruba	1990	2015	0	
Norway	Saami	1990	2005	0	
Pakistan	Baluchis	1990	2015	0	
Pakistan	Pashtuns (Pushtuns)	1990	2015	0	
Pakistan	Seraiki/Saraiki	1990	2015	0	
Pakistan	Sindhi	1990	2015	0	
Papua New Guinea	Bougainvilleans	1990	2005	0	
Peru	Lowland indigenous	1990	2015	0	
Philippines	Igorots	1990	2015	1	1990, 1998
Philippines	Muslim Malay	1990	2015	1	2001
Romania	Hungarian	1990	2015	1	2006
Russia	Avars	2005	2015	0	
Russia	Buryats	1991	2015	0	
Russia	Chechens	1991	2015	0	
Russia	Kumyk	1991	2015	1	1992
Russia	Lezgins	1991	2015	0	

Russia	Tatar/Tartar	1991	2015	1	1992
Russia	Yakuts	1991	2015	0	
Senegal	Jola/Diola	1990	2015	0	
Slovakia	Hungarian	1990	2015	0	
Somalia	Isaaq	1990	2005	0	
Somalia	Puntland Darods	1990	2005	0	
South Africa	Afrikaner	1990	2015	0	
South Africa	Khoisan	1990	2005	0	
South Africa	Zulu	1990	2015	0	
Spain	Basques	1990	2015	0	
Spain	Catalans	1990	2015	1	2006, 2009, 2014
Sri Lanka	Moor/Muslims	1990	2015	0	
Sri Lanka	Sri Lankan Tamils	1990	2015	0	
Sudan	Darfur Black Muslims	2005	2015	0	
Sudan	Nuba	1990	2015	0	
Sudan	Southern Sudanese	1990	2011	1	2011
Sweden	Saami	1990	2005	0	
Switzerland	Jurassians	1990	2005	0	
Taiwan	Aborigine	1990	2015	0	
Tanzania	Zanzibar Africans/Shirazi	2005	2015	0	
Tanzania	Zanzibar Arabs	2005	2015	0	
Thailand	Malay-Muslims	1990	2015	0	
Turkey	Kurds	1990	2015	0	
Uganda	Baganda	1990	2015	0	
UK	Catholics in Northern Ireland	1990	2015	1	1998
UK	Scots	1990	2015	1	1997, 2014
Ukraine	Crimean Russians	1991	2015	1	1991, 1994, 2014
Ukraine	Crimean Tatars/Tartars	1991	2015	1	1991, 1994, 2014
USA	Native American	1990	2015	0	
USA	Native Hawaiian	1990	2015	1	1996
USA	Puerto Ricans	1990	2005	0	
Uzbekistan	Tajiks	1991	2015	0	
Vietnam	Montagnards/Degar/Highlanders	1990	2015	0	
Yugoslavia	Albanians	1990	1991	0	
Yugoslavia	Croats	1990	1991	1	1991
Yugoslavia	Hungarians	1990	1991	0	
Yugoslavia	Kosovar Albanians	1990	2006	1	1991
Yugoslavia	Montenegrins	1990	2006	1	1992, 2006
Yugoslavia	Sandzak Muslims	1990	1991	1	1991
Yugoslavia	Slovenes	1990	1991	1	1990
Zambia	Lozi	1990	2015	0	
Zimbabwe	Ndebele	1990	2015	0	